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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current age of accountability, citing examples from the field of child welfare. The discussion focuses on: (1) a definition of accountability; (2) an examination of historical antecedents; (3) a discussion and critique of the systems-oriented styles of accountability presently in use; and (4) a summary of major problems which all styles of accountability must take into account. It is argued that the current systems-oriented trend in accountability in the social service arena, and in child welfare in particular, has questionable assumptions attached to it. After earmarking these assumptions and their origins, the paper summarizes the basic problems of accountability, makes suggestions on how to deal with these problems, and stresses the importance of doing so. The paper concludes by listing five benefits of accountability, including the fact that recipients know they will be helped rather than dehumanized. (Author)

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A CRITIQUE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHILD WELFARE

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In American culture winning is rather universally desirable. Depending on the context -- sports, business, war, education or a social service agency -- the question often asked by players and outsiders, as S. M. Miller (1965) notes, is whether the effort is a winning or losing activity, a success or a failure. In the social service arena the questions become: How is the program doing? Is it accomplishing what it intends? Clients, social workers, administrators, legislators and funding agencies are increasingly asking these questions and more specific ones as we move into what has been called the "age of accountability."

This paper will explore this age of accountability citing examples from the field of child welfare. The discussion will focus on 1) what accountability is; 2) an examination of the historical antecedents -- factors in the recent past which have influenced the several forms accountability takes today; 3) a discussion and critique of the systems oriented styles of accountability presently in use; and, 4) a summary of major problems which all styles of accountability must take into account.

THE CONCEPT OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In a rather neutral sense the term accountability can be defined as that activity which seeks to determine the extent to which a program does what it is supposed to do. More pragmatically, this requires proving that what is done (the social service provided) is worth supporting. In other words, a social service that is accountable is one that is able to show that "what it does makes a difference for the people who are served and that this service is not possible by other means (in another way) at lower costs." (Briar, 1973) In short, accountability makes the reasonable request that social services be effective and efficient in whatever they do.

To be effective is to know that whatever service has been provided clients has benefited them. That is, treatment is said to produce a positive outcome which would not have been achieved through some other type of intervention. For example, counseling parents in a certain fashion -- rather than counseling children, or removing children to foster homes -- produces the most positive consequences for the children. This type of service treatment is also efficient if the ends achieved cannot be brought about in another way at a lower cost. Thus, to be accountable as Newman and Turem suggest, child / welfare services

must consider the following three questions which incorporate the issues of effectiveness and efficiency: 1) Does intervention offer the best way to do something? 2) Are there alternatives that would accomplish more -- using the same resources? 3) Are there alternatives that would have accomplished the stated aim at less expense? Although these kinds of questions are being asked and answered in varying ways depending on the particular style of accountability, the tendency among all styles is toward a systems management orientation. There are exceptions, but even these are often couched within systems theory. Let us turn, then, to explore the historical underpinnings of this systems' oriented age of accountability. This can aid us to better understand what exists today in terms of styles of accountability and can highlight what can be avoided and retained tomorrow.

Recent History of Accountability -- A Focus on PPBS

If one was to factor out the one historical variable responsible for the present state of accountability in social services, the chances are pretty good that the researcher would arrive at the factor known in the 1960's as Program, Planning and Budgeting Systems, or PPBS. PPBS was first instituted in the Department of Defense by then Secretary of Defense, Robert

McNamara. It sought to integrate all budgeting, evaluation and planning activity into a single systematic approach. Initially, this involved assessing the costs and benefits of various types of weapons systems in different kinds of programs, and under different conditions. However, within a short time PPBS and the engineering personnel and mentality that went with it, were also instituted in social service programs, headed by HEW.

The approach was eventually discarded in the late 1960's in all types of government sponsored agencies, but not before a significant number of people and, most importantly, a number of significant people in the Nixon administration became convinced that many aspects of PPBS were worth saving. For example, PPBS' use of the engineering and management principles of rationality and efficiency, and its use of the principles of systems theory -- which stressed the interdependence of all factors affecting some problem -- were thought to be highly desirable. These elements had proven to be somewhat useful for improving the operations of government by helping to clarify program objectives, to explore budgeting costs, to recognize the consequences of agency actions, and to direct energy to alternative policies. Furthermore, it was felt that some adaptation of PPBS could continue aiding the gathering of large

aggregates of data. For example, through the use of PPBS it had become known that budget increases during the late 1960's had been devoted largely to the elderly and very little to children. (See Rivlin, 1969) Prior to PPBS this kind of data was never available, because it had never been gathered. Yet the data gathered through PPBS still said little about what was actually being accomplished by child welfare agencies. Still, PPBS did emphasize the need for making programs and practitioners more accountable for what they do. It is this part of PPBS along with the principles that go with it which the Nixon administration in March of 1970 pushed to implement through the establishment of the Office of Management and Budget The official mandate of this office was, and still is today, to emphasize the degree to which programs were delivering services and achieving their intended aims. Since this bureaucratic mandate there have been a proliferation of different evaluation approaches, or styles of accountability.[1] As we shall see, however, most of these styles have borrowed freely from the PPBS experience. Thus, we shall call them "system management styles." For analytic purposes we shall discuss these styles separately. But, the reader should keep in mind that in practice these styles are often overlapping.

Systems Management Styles of Accountability In Child Welfare

A. Cost -- Benefit Analysis

Cost -- benefit analysis is most often used as a methodological tool of systems management styles, although at times one finds it used alone. Whether alone or in tandem with other approaches, cost -- benefit analysis refers to the cost of resources, or inputs required to do something to attain certain goals, outputs or benefits. This involves identifying, as Carol Weiss indicates (1972:85):

> the benefits of a program, both tangible and intangible.... the costs of conducting the program, the direct and indirect; then (attempting) to put them into a common unit of measure-dollars. The ratio of benefits to costs is an indication of the return that society is getting from its investment in the program.

This approach stems from the managerial principle that one should make the best use of limited resources when there are competing requirements being felt. That is, the aim is always to get the most efficient set of out-puts for the amount of money available. Ideally this is determined by a comparison of what is currently being employed with alternative models which have approximately the same goals.

Certainly, cost -- benefit analysis is a potentially valuable enterprise in a period which is marked by recession

and inflation, by an unwillingness to commence new social programs, and by a decreasing confidence in the effectiveness of past programs. (See Schick 1971, and Fischer, 1973) Cost-benefit analysis can help identify a program's real and imagined costs and benefits, and in the process satisfy those legitimate skeptics who seek to be shown of a program's worth. But the rub involves finding the appropriate indicator(s) of outcome to begin with. And, determining what to measure at the outset assumes that an agency's goals are clearly delineated and quantifiable. Unfortunately, they seldom are. Furthermore,

> "even if one is able to determine that benefit-cost ratios (are) higher for one type of program than another, (one) would not necessarily choose the program yielding the higher return. The decision would depend in large part on the values (one) attaches to the goals." (Weiss, 1972:88)

These are issues which all styles of accountability must also address -- particularly those which employ cost-benefit analysis.

B. Operations Research

Like cost-benefit analysis and other systems management styles, operations research was originally used in industry where inputs and outputs could be easily quantifiable. It seeks to provide data of different ways of conducting and coordinating operations within an organization -- such as the

assignment of clients to workers, the allocation of available resources, and deciding on alternative programs. The overriding concern, to use the managerial vernacular, is to maximize return and minimize cost in performing some operation. To achieve this overall objective the following ingredients are included, as noted by Tripodi, Fellin, and Epstein. (1971: 108-109):

1) The administrative problem is defined which involves the specification of objectives, the selection of criteria to be employed in measuring those objectives, and the identification of variables that are controllable and uncontrollable.

2) An effort is made to relate program activities to program objectives.

3) The distinguishing characteristic of operations research is its use of a mathematical model to represent the system and its objectives.

4) A solution is derived mathematically from the model.

5) Data are collected in line with the variables designated in the model in order to test the model.

6) Revisions in the model are attempted with the aim of fitting model to data.

7) The final solution is put into program operation.

In essence, this approach is one of the most scientifically sophisticated. Its reliance on computer technology, probability theory and mathematical models insures a highly refined set of findings. Yet, the meaning and usefulness of these empirical findings must be considered in terms of the validity of the measures themselves. If the measures do not accurately reflect what they intend to reflect then the findings are invalid. In the area of industry this is less of a problem. For example, if the aim is to maximize the production of widgets and minimize the cost of producing them, then it is rather clear what must be measured, and how to measure them -- for example labor, raw materials, and machinery must be taken into account. But when the variables refer to "human commodities," as they do in the child welfare field, then one must very carefully assess whether or not the variables of the model employed coincide with what is occurring. Moreover, there is always the possibility that the most influential variables have been omitted entirely. For example, the effectiveness of day care in different kinds of day care centers would have to take into account a large number of inputs -- such as social background characteristics of children, styles of supervision,

the organizational framework of an agency, etc. And most importantly the model would have to determine what the specific outcome variables are and how to measure them. In short, the results of operations research are no better than the measures which are used. Unfortunately, social worker, social scientist, and lay people alike too often become unduly impressed with mathematical equations and information put in quantifiable form. The point to be made then -- which needs to be recognized in all systems oriented styles of accountability which most often rely on numerical representation of information -- is that operations and other kinds of empirical research must be interpreted in light of whether or not the appropriate variables are selected, and in terms of the extent to which the values which stand for these variables, measure what is intended. We shall have more to say about this later.

C. Management Information Systems (MIS)

Management information systems, or MIS, is one of the fastest growing styles of accountability. Its popularity is more than likely attributable to the following three factors which also define MIS. The first refers to the fact that MIS forces program staff to clarify their objectives with different clients -- a sorely neglected activity. Secondly, it characterizes

the reasons why clients enter the system to begin with. Finally, MIS collects this data in a form which permits very rapid collection of and easy access to aggregate data.

These aims are achieved by workers filling in the apparently appropriate categories of a precoded, computerized case record report for each individual case. The objectives the practitioner has for the client and the reasons for the client's entry into the system consist of the inputs to the system. The output of MIS generally refers to the worker's length of time spent on various categories of cases. Thus, MIS, like the other styles mentioned above, usually does not tell us whether or not a worker or agency is providing effective treatment in terms of improving a client's well being. The length of time spent with a client or the numbers of visits made in a period of time, do not necessarily indicate more effective treatment. However, this is less a criticism of MIS per se, than it is of the designated goals which agency personnel are often led to achieve. That is, if workers are expected to check off a preconceived explanation for a client's presence in the system, then the "real reason" may be lost.

Nevertheless, MIS can be particularly useful if used judiciously. Even within the present framework of most child

welfare case record forms, useful information can be gained about the productivity of workers, the costs of services rendered, where referrals come from, the kinds of services provided, and the kinds of cases discharged. This basic information, often in aggregate form, can help to systematize the running of an agency in the sense of helping avoid duplication of mistakes and generally informing workers, administrators and clients too, what is taking place within an agency. Ideally this will de-mystify common sense notions of what is occurring to clients and under what conditions. It can also aid workers' memories of what worked with similar kinds of clients, and thereby jolt the pervasive social work reliance on intuition toward a more realistic path of recognizing what is, rather than what is suspected to exist.

D. Management by Objectives

The last general style of system's oriented approaches of accountability to be discussed is called Management by Objectives, or MBO. This most recent entry into the accountability arena of human services seeks to overcome a strict reliance on cost accounting which has been the practice of other styles. MBO, by definition, tries to focus on the results of service intervention so that the primary concern,

for example, becomes whether the allocation of child care workers improves objectives rather than simply whether workers are spending their time more efficiently. In other words, MBO aims to clarify what the objectives of intervention are with the intent of improving the achievement of the designated objectives. This involves making the staff of an agency accountable by directing their actions.

Thus, in practice, we contend, the MBO style of accountability has become a system for monitoring staff performance. Specifically this means establishing goals for every level of the agency where control and improvement are sought. Usually these goals are established on the basis of the formal mandate set forth, for example, by the funding agency. This insures that the program remains accountable at every level of operation in that managers or program directors know what outcomes need to be produced while workers can clearly understand what is expected of them. However, clients may not be the ones to benefit over time. If the objectives set at different levels within an agency do not address the real needs and problems of clients, then an MBO accountability system may be functioning to maintain the agency rather than to benefit the clients who are being served. Thus, a system which

seeks to tighten management controls, and which sets agency priorities on the basis of official mandates may, in fact, be perpetuating inaccurate assumptions about the ways to upgrade the quality of service. However, the kinds of program objectives which are set could be reorientated to take into account the needs of the community or clients. But, this is obviously more problematic in that it requires first acknowledging that less information is actually known about what types of intervention are most effective, and then, making concerted efforts to carry out research which reveals this kind of information.

Nevertheless, as it presently is employed, MBO is still an improvement over a strict concern with cost--benefit analysis which is primarily preoccupied with questions of efficiency and less on questions of effectiveness. An MBO system is concerned with questions of effectiveness. For example, the child welfare agency which utilizes an MBO system will consider why certain children from certain types of families are in contact with the agency. The agency will ask what is supposed to be provided in light of the specific ends in view. Then with these questions posed, the agency will seek to allocate staff responsibility in a manner which permits

criteria to be established to see whether or not this can be achieved. Thus, an MBO system is the only style of accountability which directs practitioners and managers to be concerned about whether or not their actions are producing the kinds of results that are supposed to be accomplished. But, we must repeat that the priorities set and achieved may not always be the most beneficial for clients.

Problems and Prospects of Systems Management Styles of Accountability

As should be obvious by now, one of the fundamental problems running through all styles of accountability is what Patti (1975) calls the "illusion of certainty," or what more scientifically is called the validity issue. As discussed above, but which bears repeating here, this refers to the need to obtain values which stand in a one-to-one relationship with the means and ends or inputs and outputs under consideration. The problem involves the arbitrary assignment of numerical values to slippery concepts such as intellectual functioning, mental health, or child improvement. (See Scheff, 1966) To assume that this is not problematic is to make an agency's goals/objectives even more unclear and confusing than they often are already. Very simply, the reasoning here

is that if decision making is based on inaccurate information, then the accountability system in use will promote nonsense rather than more beneficial service.

For example, Shyne notes that most child welfare agencies out of a survey of 135 utilize a "global professional judgment" - or subjective views of social workers - to assess child improvement (1976). Consequently, what is defined as improvement by one worker may be backsliding for another. In short, the use of subjective judgments for evaluation purposes are very unsystematic, and not necessarily valid nor reliable. There are some child welfare agencies which do use quantitative instruments for diagnostic purposes and for measuring change, but these instruments have not been proven to be any more valid than professional judgments.

All of this is not to argue that empirically derived data is unimportant or impossible to gather. Rather, the point is more of a cautionary note of caveat emptor. That is, the consumer of an accountability system, whatever the style, must be aware that all styles are limited in their ability to unambiguously demonstrate effective change in clients.[2] Thus, the danger as Patti suggests (1975), is to assume that managerial principles of efficiency smoothly

translate to the human service field, and then to further assume that order and logic will win out over disorder and confusion. In a more ideological tone, Gruber notes (1974) that if an accountability system is primarily concerned with the "corporatist concepts" of audits and counts -- rather than with a concern for clients' well being -- then the principles of fiscal accounting and employee monitering will become the built in goals of agencies. In short, accountability must be devised so that it serves people rather than the opposite - people serving it.

Another common set of problems of accountability systems, and of social research in general, concerns interpretive fallacies which result from the level of analysis taken into account. These problems boil down to whether or not the methods of the accountability system permit one to legitimately make statements about the level of analysis of interest - the individual client or the program in operation.

The social research literature earmarks two particular directions these problems can take. Riley refers to them as the aggregative and atomistic fallacies. (1963:707) The former may occur if the accountability system is primarily concerned with individuals in roles - such as clients or

individual staff members - but inaccurately bases the analysis on an agency or agency properties - such as the division of labor in an agency or a collective index of clients' well being. An atomistic fallacy refers to the converse, where the accountability system is primarily concerned with the agency or agency properties, but the analysis is based on individuals. These two fallacies occur when, when the case does not fit the level stressed by the nature of the accountability system in use. Brief illustrations of both misuses of one level for another will perhaps help us avoid these common dilemmas in the future.

For example, an effort to collect information about the reasons why individual clients seek child welfare services, necessitates gathering data about individual clients. An aggregative fallacy may result if data is sought about a group of clients from particular neighborhoods, for example. Or, let us assume that one seeks information about the time that individual staff members spend on in-office counseling and home visits of parents of abused children. The aggregative fallacy may arise again if aggregate data is analyzed in the form of statistical means or medians concerning the time spent for counseling and in-home visits - rather than presenting the data in their raw form. Thus, one can prevent the aggregative

fallacy by gathering data about individuals whenever the aim is to make interpretations about individuals and presenting this data in a form which does not hide individual variations.

To avoid the atomistic fallacy the reverse is equally true. That is, when the aim is to make statements about group level phenomena - such as an agency's program - one must avoid focusing simply on individuals. Measures must be obtained which remain on the analytic level of the agency, permitting a more valid interpretation of what is occurring in the agency. It seems reasonable to argue for example, as does Riley (1963), that if one seeks to study a married couple, then both partners must be taken into account rather than considering only one side of the partnership. Similarly, if the focus is an agency's capacity to effectively treat abused children then the effort must be made to organize agency information around the agency rather than around discrete individuals. This could be done by collecting information about clients to form aggregate measures of the agency.

In sum, an accountability system does what it is programmed to do. Ideally, if the intent of the system is to provide information about programs or agencies then the data should refer to that level of analysis; if the individual level is

sought, then data should be gathered and analyzed accordingly. However, the ideal is not always possible because the appropriate data or methods are unavailable. In that event, the consumers of the accountability system should at the very least be on the look out, as Riley, et al note, "for a possible atomistic or aggregative fallacy so as to interpret (the data) with the necessary caution." (1963:707)

No less imperative a dilemma to consider in a critique of systems management styles of accountability is that which revolves about the question "accountability for whom?" Is it for the clients who are supposed to benefit from treatment? Can it be for the practitioners who seek to defend their interests? Is it for administrators who seek to justify or cover up weak programs (See Suchman, 1970) Or is it funding agencies that want to be assured that they are receiving what they are paying for? To the chagrin of "accountability experts," who seek to be rational, systematic and logical in their planning, many of these different interest groups must often be taken into account. This frequently presents problems in that no matter how elegant and well conceived the style of accountability, there are often disparate perceptions of an accountability system's intent and who its one or more primary

beneficiaries are. As Weiss (1972) clearly points out, outcome-process styles of accountability, and we would add all other styles of accountability as well, are rational enterprises that take place in political contexts. Thus, accountability is "often undertaken for non-rational or at least noninformational purposes." In short, efforts to impose precision like instruments inherent in systems management styles of accountability may not always be easily translated into the volatile human service arena.

However, we contend that efforts must be made to gain an awareness of this and other dilemmas noted earlier, to gain a capacity to overcome them, or at least to achieve an ability to intelligently deal with them. For the social work profession this means a concerted effort to become intelligent consumers of accountability systems. For the accountability expert this means coming to recognize that much can be learned by cooperating with social service experts. The benefits to be achieved are certainly worth the time, energy, and commitment. In conclusion, a few of the more salient benefits are listed below.

1) Accountability can aid in specifying the goals of programs which have become public policy issues subject to varying views from an assortment of different groups.

2) Social work activities often depend on public sources of funds. Thus, the social work profession, and child welfare in particular, must become reconciled to the fact that government officials and the public require knowing what is happening to their money. Accountability provides this information.

3) The social welfare structure is so large and complex that it requires controls, which accountability systems also can provide.

4) Clients deserve to be assured that the time, effort and trust they are expected to give social workers are worth it. In other words, social service recipients deserve to know that they will benefit rather than be dehumanized. If accountability in child welfare is adequately and appropriately orchestrated, it can insure this by better informing future planning and action.

5) Accountability means that child welfare and the social work profession itself will enter the 21st century as the scientifically based professions they must become - a label that few areas of social service can yet claim. This in turn will enhance the prestige of the helping professions and the people they employ.

Footnotes

1) While the terms accountability and evaluation are often used interchangeably, evaluation in a strict sense only refers to outcome-process models. (C. F. Weiss, 1972; Schick, 1971; Carter, 1971; Shyne, 1976; and, Suchman, 1970).

2) Social service agencies often develop techniques or strategies to reduce their perceived uncertainties about how best to bring about effective change in clients. These strategies are seldom in the clients' best interests. Scott (1967) for example, found that social service agencies for the blind may seek to optimize their own survival by selecting clients who possess attributes highly valued by society or who indicate a greater likelihood of successful outcomes. Clark (1960) also found similar mechanisms at work in junior colleges and community colleges. These institutions certainly may benefit their clients, but clients who are preselected or not "cooled out" are probably the ones who benefit more.

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